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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000204

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, PM/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO
SECDEF FOR OSD MELISSA DALTON

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF COMMANDER WITH STAFFDEL CAMMACK ON
SYRIA, U.S. ASSISTANCE, TERRORISM

REF: BEIRUT 134

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Jean Kahwagi told visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Perry Cammack that he was "very satisfied" with the military-to-military relationship with the U.S. At the same time, he lamented the slowness with which U.S. equipment assistance reaches the LAF. Fighting terrorism was the most important challenge the LAF faces, he said, and specific equipment needs should be met. Kahwagi reported he planned to request fixed-wing airplanes and helicopters on his upcoming trip to Washington February 22-27. He complained about technical difficulties with U.S.-supplied secure radio equipment used along the northern border; the Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation subsequently arranged for an assessment and training of the equipment the week of February 23.

2. (C) Kahwagi expressed concern about security in the Palestinian refugees camps and PFLP-GC military bases. Yet, he was optimistic about cooperation with Syria on border issues. He commended the LAF's relationship with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in maintaining the security situation along Lebanon's southern border with Israel. End summary.

U.S. MILITARY
TRAINING AND ASSISTANCE

3. (C) Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Jean Kahwagi told visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member Perry Cammack and Ambassador that he was "very satisfied" with the LAF's training relationship with the U.S. Speaking in his LAF office in Yarze on February 17, Kahwagi said he was grateful for U.S. assistance and the LAF was putting "full strength" behind U.S. training for the Lebanese Special Forces and Comprehensive Training Program's engineering school. However, Kahwagi lamented the speed with which equipment needs were being met by the United States.

¶4. (C) Kahwagi also informed Cammack that he was looking forward to his visit to Washington at the end of February at the invitation of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He said he planned to bring a list of items to discuss with Pentagon officials, including Lebanon's need for fixed-wing airplanes and either Apache or Cobra helicopters. The LAF still sought funding for the remaining 48 M60 tanks it was to receive from the U.S. through a third-party transfer, he said. (Note: Funding for 12 of 60 M60s tanks has already been identified. End note.) Kahwagi acknowledged that most U.S. assistance to the LAF was dedicated to fight terrorism out of a strategic interest. "If I fail in fighting terrorism here, then eventually the U.S. and Europe will fail, too," he said. However, Kahwagi argued that there were specific types of equipment he needed to do so and said, "What I need, I will try to get. I will not take only what you want to give me."

¶5. (C) Kahwagi complained about technical difficulties with Datron radio equipment supplied under 1206 funding to assist the LAF with secure communications on the northern border. However, we believe many of the technical issues are the result of local infrastructure problems, rather than equipment failure. The Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) has arranged for a technical team from the company to survey the reported problems and to provide training on the use of the equipment, beginning the week of February 23.

PALESTINIAN CAMPS
AND BASES OF CONCERN

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¶6. (C) When asked about his biggest challenges, Kahwagi immediately pointed to the security situation in the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp and the Palestinian military bases such as Qoussayeh. He explained that many who had committed terrorist acts in Iraq had now turned up in Lebanon's Palestinian camps, including Ain el Hilweh and Beddawi. The LAF, he said, does not operate inside the camps, but military intelligence had learned of the existence of wanted persons there who were being protected by members of Fatah al-Islam (a Sunni extremist group).

¶7. (C) He also said that the Palestinian bases of Qoussayeh (which straddles the border with Syria) and Naammeh (near the Beirut airport) also posed a concern. The LAF could take Naammeh by force "easily," but this would not solve the problem, Kahwagi said; a political decision between Lebanon and Syria was required. If the U.S. wanted to raise this with Syrian President Bashar Asad, Kahwagi believed it would not hurt.

SYRIA AND BORDER PATROL

¶8. (C) On Syria, Kahwagi reported that Asad, the Syrian Minister of Defense, and the head of the Syrian intelligence services had told him they were willing to discuss the issue of the Palestinian bases with Lebanon during Kahwagi's November 2008 visit to Damascus. During his visit, he discussed with the Syrians joint plans to secure the border between the two countries, he said. The Syrians claimed they would put additional troops on the border, but could not prevent all smuggling or terrorist infiltration into Lebanon because of the terrain and size of the border region, Kahwagi reported. Lebanon, Kahwagi said, had promised to also sent additional troops to the eastern border in the next six or seven months. He characterized the promises made by the Syrian leadership as "credible."

¶9. (C) Kahwagi also noted that the LAF had a "very good" working relationship with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) along Lebanon's southern border with Israel.

Lebanon would continue to do its best to prevent any hostile action against Israel from south Lebanon, he said. However, Lebanon would not allow Israel -- Lebanon's enemy -- to attack it either, Kahwagi stressed.

10. (U) Note: General Kahwagi departs February 22 for a five-day trip to the U.S. at the invitation of CJCS Admiral Mullen. Kahwagi will also meet with DSCA, DOD/OSD, Department of State (NEA and PM), CENTCOM, ARCENT, and SOCOM officials during his trip. End note.

SISON